# JON CARROLL

## The Journalist At Kitty Hawk

SUPPOSE YOU were the only journalist on that sand dune in North Carolina the week before Christmas 1903, and you saw the Wright Flyer remain aloft for 12 seconds while traveling 120 feet. Perhaps you would have thought deep thoughts, but it's equally possible that you would have sidled up to Orville and said:

"Well, that's a pretty trippy way of getting across the street while lying down on a motorized kite, but it's too brief to be a viable public entertainment and too slow to be an efficient means of public transportation, and by the way did you pack any sandwiches in that bag?"

*Despite our best efforts, the future continues to lie ahead of us*

Having failed to think deep thoughts, you might have asked Orville to think them for you. It's possible he would have said, "Someday, I envision huge metallic airplanes spanning the oceans of the world, flying 40,000 feet above the earth while providing nine channels of stereo entertainment and a choice of complimentary beverages."

It's equally possible he would have said: "You know what this thing would be good for? Fishing! You fly *above* the water, see, and there'd be no wake to disturb the fish, and you'd just drop a line ..."

Inventions are often smarter than their inventors.

It's also possible — no, probable — that Orville would have discussed at great length the political intricacies of the bicycle repair scene in Dayton, Ohio. It's almost certain that he would have tried to persuade you to invest in the Wright Flyer 2.0, a really great machine that would have all the bugs worked out and could he give you a call next week some time?

WHICH BRINGS ME to Cyberthon, a 24-hour trade show/clan gathering/meat market/brainstorm held last weekend at the studios of Colossal Pictures at the edge of the Bayview District in San Francisco.

Cyberthon was a celebration and exploration of virtual reality, which is a very primitive computer-based technology that aims, finally, at nothing less than creating entirely artificial, fully convincing universes. This goal has many psychological and philosophical implications, although no one is sure what they are.

Cyberthon was produced by the Whole Earth Institute, purveyors of fine Kitty Hawkish experiences for some time now. Like Kitty Hawk, it was an event that required much imagination and a willingness to deal with alternate visions of the future.

For instance: A friend insists that I go see the tactile feedback demo, which is right next to the flying mouse. (Cyberthon is the kind of event where "right next to the flying mouse" is a viable direction). I check it out. A representative of TiNi, the tactile feedback firm, wires my fingers with electrodes.

He's talking about undersea mining and working with toxic waste and space stations, and meanwhile I am getting tiny pulses at my fingertips. That's it. He pushes a button on a keyboard; I get a tiny pulse in my fingertips.

"The implications," he says.

Yes, the implications; 120 feet in 12 seconds. The implications. Tomorrow, I'll get to the scene itself, the "-thon" portion of the event. That had implications, too.

ONE LAST THING. There is a certain melancholy in being a 46-year-old journalist at Kitty Hawk. Even if you don't know where all this is leading, you're aware that it's leading somewhere, and that somewhere will be interesting, and you won't be around for the best parts.

I have seen the future and I'm not in it.

# JON CARROLL

## The Journalist At Kitty Hawk, II

THINK LOTS OF PEOPLE wearing laminated name tags wandering through a maze of tiny partitioned rooms. Think high stuffiness quotient. Think moderate conversational noise level interspersed with unmistakable, although undefinable, computer sounds. Think geeky guys and gals in black.

Think Cyberthon.

Think most of all high-risk conversations, veering from surprising connections to complete incomprehension, sometimes in the same sentence. Billed as an adventure at the far frontiers of computer technology, Cyberthon quickly became an adventure at the edge of interpersonal relations, as a community that didn't know it was a community became one.

*Cyberthon, at which we look for something while something looks for us*

Maybe. In five years, we'll know more.

Cyberthon was a 24-hour event hosted by the Whole Earth Institute at Colossal Pictures, a huge warehouse studio on the water near Hunters Point. It was designed to explore the various facets of "virtual reality," a visionary new branch of computer-based technology having to do with the creation of artificial universes.

The essential formula was: Take relevant humans (maybe 500 in all), subject them to various forms of sensory stimulation and/or deprivation, snake vigorously for 24 hours and see what happens. Brian Eno, Timothy Leary, Bill Walton, Wavy Gravy, Stewart Brand, William Gibson, various Grateful Dead employees — that crowd.

Plus a dozen or so potential Nobel Prize winners, a dozen or so classic burnouts and a dozen or so holy fools. Big fun in Northern California.

I AM NOT SURE when the "-thon" concept entered American life. The suffix itself is from "marathon," a very long race, and has come to denote a very long anything. Telethons, for instance, are very long television shows.

The Committee, the old improvisational comedy group, once held a Satirathon, an all-night barrage of wit. And many stores routinely hold Sale-a-Thons, shopping for the indefatigable.

Cyberthon had exhibit booths open from noon Saturday to noon Sunday. There were goggle-and-glove demonstrations, which was the Kitty Hawk end of things — very primitive and unconvincing, but also very amazing. There were games, 3-D technology in a startling array of forms, computer conferencing demonstrations and various attempts at interactivity.

You get on this stationary bicycle, see, in front of a computer screen, and you pedal through an imaginary landscape (your basic Chuck Jones/Road Runner techno-desert) in a race with imaginary vehicles. Or you enter a plastic-and-plywood mock-up of a pedestrian walkway of the Golden Gate Bridge, strap on a tape recorder and listen to a spooky voice attempting to persuade you to jump.

Having done all that, you retire to Mom's Kitchen, smack in the middle of a maze, and have milk and cookies or a peanut butter sandwich or a few handfuls of M&Ms.

Cyberthon was a sugar-based life-form.

MAYBE SOMEDAY I can tell you what it may have meant; for now, I can tell you only how it was. Here's how it was: I was standing in a darkened room and wearing high-tech 3-D glasses. I was watching a 3-D videotape that had been shot at Cyberthon just minutes before. The tape showed people viewing the hologram exhibit.

The man next to me, also wearing glasses, suddenly says, "There's me. That's right. I was there; I remember the camera."

"And now you're here," I said. "Time must exist after all."

"So far," he said cautiously.